

Acupuncture

Acupuncture is part of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) and dates back thousands of years. It involves inserting fine needles into specific points on the skin or applying various other techniques to the acupuncture points to bring about healing.

The foundation of Chinese acupuncture is the belief in an energy force called Qi (pronounced 'chee'). This energy, or life force, circulates around the body through invisible channels called meridians. If the flow of Qi in the meridians is disrupted, then disease may follow. By inserting fine needles into particular acupuncture points, the disruption can be corrected and the flow of Qi restored. Whether or not you believe in the philosophy of Qi makes no difference to the effects of acupuncture. Scientific trials around the world have found that acupuncture is a safe and useful treatment for many different disorders.

Yin and Yang

The ancient Chinese proposed that a balance of two opposing yet complementary forces of energy, called Yin and Yang, sustain every living thing. Half the body's organs and meridians are defined as Yin in relation to the other half, which are defined as Yang. When Yin and Yang are out of balance in the body, disease may occur.

Research has found that acupuncture may be effective in treating a range of disorders. Some of these include:

- **Digestive** – colitis, constipation, diarrhoea, gastritis, ulcer.
- **Emotional** – anxiety, depression.
- **General** – chronic fatigue syndrome, giving up smoking, muscle injuries, obesity, stress management, tiredness, travel sickness.
- **Gynaecological** – heavy menstrual bleeding, painful periods, menopausal symptoms, pre-menstrual syndrome.
- **Musculo-skeletal** – back pain, osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis, tennis elbow and whiplash.
- **Neurological** – Bell's palsy, carpal tunnel syndrome, headache, Meniere's disease, migraine, pain, paralysis, shingles.
- **Respiratory** – asthma, bronchitis, common cold, hayfever.
- **Vascular** – haemorrhoids, high blood pressure, varicose veins.

The British National Health Service carried out a systematic review of the evidence for the use of acupuncture to treat or manage a range of disorders. They found that there was evidence that acupuncture is effective to treat dental pain, jaw pain and to control nausea after operations and chemotherapy treatment.

For many conditions where acupuncture can be used, the evidence has not been systematically reviewed, or the current scientific evidence to prove that it is effective is not yet established.

Clinical guidelines published in many different countries have found that acupuncture is moderately helpful in a wide range of conditions, particularly those which involve pain.

How acupuncture is performed

Pre-sterilised disposable needles should be used. Depending on the location of the treatment, the patient will either sit or lie down. Properly done, acupuncture is painless because the needles are very fine (around 0.2mm in width). Once inserted, the patient may feel mild tingling around the site, warmth or heaviness, or even nothing at all. An acupuncturist may use other techniques including:

- **Cupping** – suction designed to bring Qi and blood to the acupuncture point.
- **Chinese herbs** – either mixed by the acupuncturist or in pre-prepared tablet or granulated form.
- **Laser** – used instead of the needles to activate acupuncture points.
- **TCM remedial massage** – techniques applied to specific acupuncture points or meridians.
- **Moxibustion** – burning herbs held over or applied to acupuncture points.

A feeling of relaxation

After a session of acupuncture, the patient normally feels relaxed and refreshed, but specific responses depend on the individual. For instance, some people feel energised, while others feel sleepy. Occasionally, the symptoms get a little worse before they improve. The number of treatments you need depends on your condition. In most cases, patients experience a reduction in symptoms within a few sessions. The idea of acupuncture is to restore the natural balance of energy inside your body. Once the balance is restored, the body can take care of itself and no further treatments are necessary.

Choosing an acupuncturist

Some health care practitioners offer acupuncture after completing a short course. However, the philosophy of acupuncture is complex, so you should only use a qualified acupuncturist. From 2000, all Victorian acupuncturists and Chinese herbalists have to be registered. You don't need a referral from your doctor to see an acupuncturist.

Where to get help

- Australian Acupuncture and Chinese Medicine Association (AACMA)
- Federation of Chinese Medicine Associations (FCMA)
- Your doctor
- Your Chinese medicine doctor
- Australian Medical Acupuncture College.

Things to remember

- Acupuncture is part of traditional Chinese medicine and consists of inserting fine needles into specific points on the skin.
- Acupuncture is a safe and effective treatment for a range of disorders.
- The treatment is effective even if you don't believe in the underlying philosophy.

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